



Local Wonders: Seasons in the Bohemian Alps

Ted Kooser

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Ted Kooser describes with exquisite detail and humor the place he calls home in the rolling hills of southeastern Nebraska—an area known as the Bohemian Alps. Nothing is too big or too small for his attention. Memories of his grandmother's cooking are juxtaposed with reflections about the old-fashioned outhouse on his property. When casting his eye on social progress, Kooser reminds us that the closing of local schools, thoughtless county weed control, and irresponsible housing development destroy more than just the view. In the end, what makes life meaningful for Kooser are the ways in which his neighbors care for one another and how an afternoon walking with an old dog, or baking a pie, or decorating the house for Christmas can summon memories of his Iowa childhood. This writer is a seer in the truest sense of the word, discovering the extraordinary within the ordinary, the deep beneath the shallow, the abiding wisdom in the pithy Bohemian proverbs that are woven into his essays.

Local Wonders: Seasons in the Bohemian Alps Details

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Lindsey says

There is a quote on the cover of this book from Kooser's friend Jim Harrison: "The quietest magnificent book I've ever read." Brian and I have been reading this book aloud for the past year, and each time I'd put it back on the nightstand, I'd see that quote and think what a fitting description it was. I've always been a fan of Kooser's poetry, also for its quiet insights, so I was excited to read these essays. They are organized by season and range from observations of his rural Nebraskan neighbors and quirky thoughts he has during the day, to beautifully rendered memories of growing up in Ames and frank discussions of his bout with cancer. Some of the pieces are several pages, while others are only a few sentences; after almost all of them, though, one or both of us would make a contented "hmm." Kooser's word choice is simple and straightforward and perfect. This is one of those books that you just know you'll return to for the sense of calm reflection it provides. It easily ranks among my all-time favorite collections of essays, right up there with Barbara Kingsolver's "Small Wonder," and I can't recommend it highly enough.

Bonnie says

A wonderful book of essays, I tried to read it very slowly to make it last but got carried away and finished it today.

I especially enjoyed the bits about his family and relatives and most especially enjoyed his take on garage sales. He explains perfectly the draw of going to such sales, describing them as theater. I also loved the ending, metaphor is definitely his area.

I was fortunate enough to take a class from Mr. Kooser a few weeks ago at Chautauqua, it was a lovely day.

Also loved the title and the cover but...

there are a couple things I didn't like: the print was too small and I think the book would have been set off better if there was more white space. A profound ending to an essay needs a break of white space or it's own page. It gives the reader time to pause, take a breath and think about the last essay before starting the next one.

But, overall a great read.

M. Sarki says

<http://msarki.tumblr.com/post/8511893...>

"In the end, what makes life meaningful for Kooser are the ways in which his neighbors care for one another and how an afternoon walking with an old dog, or baking a pie, or decorating the house for Christmas can summon memories of his Iowa childhood." —University of Nebraska Press/Bison Books

These days my wife and I clean and clear out as much clutter as possible from our lives. I am still the biggest collector of the thousand or so books remaining in my possession. So, to read this memoir by Ted Kooser about Nebraska's *Bohemian Alps* and the flair and personalities of the inhabitants who never throw anything

away in case they might someday need it, all their hoarding of artifacts, trinkets of glass, and buckets of nails and bolts and wire seems excessively a waste of space and time to me, and in truth, Kooser's book becomes in short order a bore. Through the course of these related rural histories and anecdotes about *the good life*, it is obvious to me that Kooser is a huge sentimentalist. His established literary rank provides an automatic forum for this type of work. In fact it was the jacket blurbs and glowing reviews that first drew me to him, not any previous knowledge of his work or his standing in the world of poetry and letters.

The novelist, essayist, wild-game-chef, and poet Jim Harrison's blurb about this book being "*the quietest magnificent book*" he's ever read is all over this production. It is on the front of the jacket, it is on the back, and it may even be found inside the cloth boards on the nice, clean pages as well. Being a university publication, the book itself is of the highest quality. It is obviously nice to be connected to the academics and one of the anointed ones. Ted Kooser is a two-time U. S. poet laureate and a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. I have read a couple of his poems, and they were OK, but not of the quality I would think worthy of what I believe a winning Pulitzer Prize should consist of. But that is just me talking. And it is not sour grapes at all as I am happy as a clam for him for any success he can garner, even if undeserved.

In this memoir Kooser takes us through all four seasons of the year and relates to us stories of his family and neighbors, as well as tales about the dogs and other critters that amble through the pages from time to time. There are some ideas or positions of his I should think need advancement such as his humor for the silliness of hunters or his disdain for the encroachment of land developers and their monstrous constructions of large homes for people who want to live twenty miles out from town and commute to work from the safe bucolic fields of Kooser's farm country. But that happens everywhere there is beautiful and pristine land that these greedy idiots care to ugly and destroy.

Ted Kooser is a very nice man. You can tell by looking at the photograph of him on the rear jacket flap. His skillful yarns weave gently through every relative and neighbor he has known. He is big on the past. Reading him is like taking an easy stroll through the park, never in a hurry to get anywhere, and willing to take in all the surroundings. But there is little heavy seriousness to this book. He is much too nice for any extreme depths of consciousness. There is no edge, and literally no jeopardy. There is little reason to read this book after being willfully subjected to the intense negotiations of writers such as D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Bernhard, or Robert Walser. And I would think the great French philosopher Gilles Deleuze would not have wasted his precious time reading this memoir. But the *man of letters* Jim Harrison thinks this book is great, and Harrison is a grizzled old burly fellow, and he writes poetry as well, so that makes him a sensitive guy too. I began the book with good feelings, I admit. I thought it was pretty nice. Of course, I was on my summer vacation with nothing pressing on my plate and plenty of time for a leisurely amble through the mind of Ted Kooser. But I found little there, especially when I unwittingly and concurrently began my study of D. H. Lawrence. Kooser had been divorced and still occasionally licked the wounds suffered from being an absent dad, but there was little in his life to compare to the freedom and courage of my new-found Lawrence. And it wasn't the sexy novels of Lawrence I was reading. Not *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, not *Sons and Lovers*, nothing so controversial as that. It was merely the Lawrence letters and memoirs that were finding their way into my consciousness. And the truest biography exists through ones collected letters. D.H. Lawrence was a serious man. Most likely too serious for most, with more questions hanging than agreements, more skepticism than belief, and his controversial opinions engaged always in looking for a wider argument.

I suppose the particularities of why I was most attracted at first to this Kooser book and why I most dislike it now is summed up best by these remarks by some of the his readers:

"The essays are sprinkled with Czech and Bohemian proverbs, reflecting the wry common-sense wisdom of

the Old World that informs his point of view."

"I really enjoyed the anecdotes throughout, the pace of life, and the heartland stories."

"A church member loaned me this book by the former Poet Laureate. It is not a book of poems. It is gentle remarks on life in Nebraska hills."

"I recommend it for its care, its lack of anxiety, and its simplicity."

So here's the deal: I am much too serious for this type of literature, but obviously many of his readers are not when I am personally confronted by the sheer number of his admirers. I would say that people in general like to feel good, and this book does that for reasons stated previously regarding sentimentalism. Of course, for others, there is the almost obligatory life-changing story present near the end of the book where Kooser uses another parable, this time about losing a donkey, and relates the story of his fight with cancer and what became of it. Sort of like my own mantra of looking at problems as opportunities rather than something negative, but the notable difference being that my mantra is minus the god and personal savior element. And you probably already have guessed it, another reason here for me to cringe.

Patricia says

Ted Kooser, former US Poet Laureate (2004-2006) has written a delightful book of life in the Bohemian Alps of Nebraska. Each of the vignettes started as a poem which was then expanded to be a story about life in the slow lane of rural Nebraska. All phases of life are here, the local rummage sales, the bank building being restored to a community center, moving the outhouse and his love of hardware stores and descriptions of his favorite sweater, preparing the garden plot and his concern about the encroaching development into area. I met him at a seminar at Chautauqua this summer. He told us that when he worked in the insurance industry, he would write poems at night and take into the office for his secretary to read. If the secretary did not understand the poem, it went into the trash. He only kept poems that everyone could enjoy.

Thank you Ted!

Eric says

This delightful little volume is well worth a subsequent listen. And its language is so engaging as to make me want to order a printed version so that I may go back and underline and highlight some passages that just demand more than a single look - which is the one down side of audio books that I have come to appreciate. When I first picked it up my first thought was, "On, another name for the Nebraska Sand Hills." But as I came to find out the Bohemian Alps are in the same state, but some distance away.

From time to time the narration makes you wonder, "What happened to the rest of the story?" But the quality of the stories makes you quickly forget the last one, and want to move on to the next. Late in the book Kooser tells of realizing that a glove he seems to have lost is probably on a rural road where he had walked the previous day, so he sets out to re-trace his steps. He encounters a pickup truck who stops to ask him if he is in need of aid, to which he replies that he is not. The pickup driver then asks if he may have lost a glove - which he only picked up because he thought it might be ruined should a bit of weather come along. Where

else but the middle of America?

Chrissie says

I cannot think of any person who could possibly not love this book.....

BEFORE READING THD BOOK:

This book grabbed my interest in a blink of an eye. Against all logical reasoning, I am putting it on the shelf from which I buy books. This is terribly out of character for me..... No, it does not take place in Czechoslovakia, but in fact in southeastern Nebraska. Many of the people living in this area were originally from Czechoslovakia. There are also many people of German descent. The author is the 13th Poet Laureate of the United States. Poetry does not usually attract me, but take a peek at the prose. B&N has it on view. Some reviewer compared it to Andrew Wyeth's painting. That's what hooked me first. I never would have found this without GR! I don't even care that I cannot find a Kirkus review!

ON COMPLETION:

This book is breathtakingly beautiful! I fear that any review I attempt to write will not adequately do the book justice. I need to collect my thoughts first, but Heather, definitely do buy this book! Jeanette, you must too! Kathy, I am sure you will love it. I will send recommendations to those of my GR friends for whom I believe the book would be particularly meaningful. I do in fact recommend it to all of my GR friends.

I will write more later, and I promise no spoilers.

You choose this book for the writing, which is gentle, reflective, imaginative, humorous, heartfelt and plainspoken. The book is a memoir about Ted Kooser's life, about all the mundane events that make up my life and yours too. He splits the book into four chapters - spring, summer, fall and finally winter. Although this represents one year, he speaks of events in his past that have left an indelible imprint on who he is. So it is NOT a book about one year of his life. Not at all! It is about his mother, his father, Uncle Tubby, his great aunt, Helen Stetter, Grandmother Kooser and friends. It is about growing older, about raising your kids and seeing them leave home. It is about dogs. It is about all those little things that make up our lives, particularly those specific to rural life. He throws in Czech sayings which lie as a backdrop to life in this rural town 20 miles west of Lincoln, Nebraska. He grew up in Ames, Iowa, so you get acquainted with life there too.

Each chapter is composed of bits of life, reflections on people and daily events. Now I will try and give you some examples. Let's start with the dogs. He has two. Alice is young and full of energy. Her passion is catching frogs. She doesn't walk; she runs, she scampers, she dances in circles. Then there is old Buddy:

I tell my friend about our other dog. Buddy, an English pointer who at fourteen or fifteen years of age (he was a stray and we don't know his birth year) he lies motionless most of the day, sleeping or with his eyes just open enough to see if Alice is going to pounce on him again. She wants him to play and doesn't give up easily. She thinks he's a large rubber squeaky toy. We've given him Ascriptin and steroids and are now trying a human arthritic medicine you can buy over-the-counter. It makes us feel better even if it doesn't help him much. I lie down on the rug next to him at least once a day and rub him all over and stick my nose in his ear. His big paws smell like years of hunting, like a hay-field in sunlight. This is a dog who once killed badgers and raccoon and who ran with the coyotes. (page 10-11)

Then there is the episode when his son Jeff was leaving home..... Jeff was Ted's son by his first wife. They

were divorced when Jeff was two. Jeff had grown up with his Mom in Iowa. When he came to Nebraska to finish college he lived with Ted and his new wife, Kathleen, for three years. This was such an opportunity to be the father he had never been able to be. Life sort of crazily fell apart when he was to leave:

One chilly Saturday while he was in Iowa visiting his girlfriend, I sized up his old treehouse. He and a friend had built it one summer - a crazy catawampus collection of old boards, window screens and plywood strung between a clump of three old ash trees. The summer they built it they slept out there for weeks. It was their place on our place, and it had become for me a central symbol of Jeff's place in my life and all the happiness we'd shared. Now I wanted to tear it to splinters. I wanted to pull it apart and stack up the boards in neat piles and put the nails back in their jar. (page 25)

You see, the reader comes to care for Ted because he bravely exposes his foibles, his weaknesses, his idiotic behavior. Such behavior we all recognize in ourselves. Well, I certainly do! By the end of the book I really, really liked Ted! In the last few pages of the book he uses a metaphor of a man walking from one end of a speeding train to the other. This is simply stunning! I cannot tell you more because it sort of sums up the book.

OK, here is an example of Ted's humor:

For the past few years it's been fashionable for young women to wear ballcaps and to snap the strap on the back under their ponytails. I like the looks of that, their shiny ponytails jauntily swinging, but it's hard not to think of the rear ends of horses. (page 90)

Or what do you think of this?

The Bohemian Alps is a worn place in the carpet of grass we know as the Great Plains, the spot where the glaciers wiped their snowy galoshes coming in and out. (page 45)

This I must quote too:

I was raised by clenched-jawed German-Americans who wouldn't have called for help if a tree had fallen on them. (page 60)

My husband is notorious for refusing to ask for help.... He too has German descent! You must certainly have heard the joke about Moses? 40 years in the desert and no, he couldn't possibly ask anyone for directions! You must read the episode about Ted's outhouse!

I could go on and on and on, giving more and more quotes. Some episodes will appeal to one reader more than another, but I think everyone will find numerous passages they will enjoy. And the summing up at the end is just wonderful! The train metaphor really struck me down. I had to give the book five stars.

Casey says

All of Kooser's work is excellent, and this book of short, vignette-style essays is no exception. Really, this book should be handed out in conjunction with tourism info through the Chamber of Commerce in Nebraska. Through the specific details of the four seasons in the "Bohemian Alps" in SE Nebraska, Kooser gets at a kind of universal sense of what it's like to live in the Great Plains.

E. says

A church member loaned me this book by the former Poet Laureate. It is not a book of poems. It is gentle remarks on life in Nebraska hills.

Gentle is a good word to describe it. And generous. Kooser observes each season and the people, nature, land, and culture around him. He remarks on events in his life, including a startling section on his cancer diagnosis.

This is one of those books you have lying around and pick up and read a few pages every day or two, rather than reading large chunks in one sitting.

I recommend it for its care, its lack of anxiety, and its simplicity.

Leah Kline says

Ted made me a fan of poetry

Melody says

Random musings in prose from one of our best poets. He's the guy I'd like to be stranded with at a truckstop in a snowstorm. Interesting to read his prose, which is in parts lyrical, in parts elegant, and in parts reassuringly ordinary. Kooser words make me think of Andrew Wyeth's paintings, and sometimes even Edward Hopper's. There's that certain slant of light to nearly every page. He's got a fierce love of the land, in particular his own Nebraska soil, and of his neighbors who work that land.

Annette says

Written by an honored poet and former insurance company executive, this biography beautifully details the author's life in the low hills of southeastern Nebraska. Kooser is a master of writing big about small things -- "seeing small." Winner of the Nebraska Book Award for Nonfiction in 2003, Kooser was named the nation's poet laureate in October 2004 [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/... \(lj\)](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/... (lj))

Jennifer Pullen says

Some moments of lovely close observation of nature and place. However, sometimes it got a little too cozy.

Rachel says

It took me a while to get the feel for this author's style. I read his poetry book this month and this book about his life (and the seasons) is in a poetry style. Which takes a bit of a mind turn for reading and comprehending. I enjoyed it but the first bit too a while for me to turn into. The author uses his present and the seasons to tell about his past and some of the stories he has gathered. As he passes through the seasons he remembers those who have passed from his life.

There were lots of good 'pieces' that jumped out at me which is why I made so many notes of pages to look at again before I turned it in!

"Do not choose your wife at a dance, but on the field amongst the harvesters"(77).

"Nebraska has three cities: Omaha and its suburbs, with over a half million people; Lincoln, with a little over two hundred thousand; and Grand Island, with about fifty thousand, which in some states would be considered a town. There are a number of towns with several thousand and hundreds of little villages like Garland that have survived from the days when you didn't want to be more than a dozen round-trip miles from a trading center, because that was about as far as you could push a team and wagon in one day. The rest of the state is a vast grassy preserve set aside for those of us who like to be left alone"(11).

"Losing someone you love can make you want to count every nail and bolt and washer you own. 'He who has daughters has family,' the Bohemians say, 'and he who has sons has strangers'"(24).

"I like exposed layers of rock with their reliable order, thousands of years stacked on shelves like old courthouse ledgers, the oldest on the bottom and the most recent on the top, seashells stuck between the pages like bookmarks marking passages in time, an occasional fish pressed flat and black like the tongue of a shoe"(45).

"I was raised by clench-jawed German-Americans who wouldn't have called for help if a tree had fallen on them. When my mother was in her eighties, she fell in her house and twisted her ankle so badly she said she thought she might faint. Rather than use her cordless phone to call my sister or an ambulance, she crawled across the living room floor, turned the floor fan on, and let it blow on her face so she wouldn't pass out"(60).

"Pheasant season starts tomorrow, and on the next few weekends, dozens of pickups will be meandering from side to side down our road, their drivers and passengers peering out into the cornfields from under the bills of their orange caps, not paying the slightest attention to where they're going. Guns don't kill people, people driving pickups kill people"(97).

"People don't lock the doors to their houses, and the only reason they lock their cars is, in August, to keep neighbors from putting zucchini in the backseat"(97).

"Lots of people in the country have a capacity for hoarding, and I am among them. I find it difficult to throw away anything, believing that this little scrap of wire or this four-foot section of garden hose might come in handy for something someday"(100).

"Nearly every person who farms in our area has a day job in Seward or Lincoln and farms in the evenings and on weekends. But it's still a good life. 'Not ever a chicken digs for nothing'"(111).

"He who goes into the forest should take bread for a week"(115).

"I spend lots of winter days with books. I probably have the largest private library in Seward County, thousands of books. I can't resist them. Writers are writers because they love to read. If I were to read two or three books every week, I couldn't live long enough to read through the books I own, but that doesn't keep me from buying more. Most of the ones I buy are from bookstore sale tables, but I've also found a number at thrift shops and garage sales"(140-141).

Steve says

A beautiful little book full of reflections and observations about living in the Bohemian Alps of southeast Nebraska, and growing up in Ames Iowa. Kooser, former Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry crafts his stories to truly bring them to life. Divided into the four seasons of a year these stories of his life range from his childhood Christmases in Iowa to his current observations on county weed management along rural roads told with an equal vividness and interspersed with bits of local Czech wit and wisdom. I was pleasantly surprised with how much this book drew me into the authors stories of his life and observations.

Terri says

If Ted Kooser wrote tractor repair manuals I would read those too.
